

FRIENDSHIP AMONG TODAY’S TEENAGERS. AN ASCERTAINING STUDY

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Abstract: *In psychological terms, adolescence is characterized by a propensity toward association in different groups, friendship being the major criterion for selection and cohesion. Friendship relationships established during high school years bear the seal of strength and durability, many of them being preserved intact for extended periods of several decades. Our proposed research was meant to identify the elements that the surveyed adolescents considered to be the qualities of a friend, and the aspects that support such a relationship. A number of 1127 high school students from Alba Iulia County were questioned¹², whereas the age, the classes and the specializations of studies were representative for that area. The results show the need for honesty, trust and empathy that teenagers consider important for the building of a friendship.*

Key words: *values, friendship, adolescence, education, school, community.*

1. The qualities of a friend

Although the statement *Man needs friends* represents a truism, when we analyze and, especially, live the experience of building and strengthening this particular type of interpersonal relationship in its dynamics, which begins with choosing our friends and continues with keeping in touch with them for the rest of our life, we understand the difficulty of this experience. Specialized works emphasize that a person goes from being a simple acquaintance to being a friend if a number of friendship’s features are met, namely: reciprocity, constancy, self-sacrifice, sharing thoughts, feelings and experiences, communion, particularly manifested by the desire to spend more time together and to advance professionally or spiritually.

First, we intend to highlight the existence of some levels in the formation of each feature and a certain course in building them in a certain order, with interpenetrations and specific aspects that give an individual character to each relationship with a person. In this respect, students were asked to mention three qualities for which a person receives the status of best friend. We opted for an open item as we wanted to make an inventory of the characteristics that the students identify in their friends. In Table 1, we summarized the students' responses to this item, stating the place of each of the three qualities of a friend in the list made by the students and the total number / the total percentage of the qualities’ mentioning, independent of their position.

Table on the place of the qualities of a person in a friendship *Table 1*

Qualities	1st Place		2nd Place		3rd Place		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
honesty	414	36,7	134	11,8	74	6,6	622	55,2

trust	172	15,3	108	9,5	140	12,4	318	37,2
empathy	139	12,3	147	13,0	118	10,5	404	35,8
kindness	45	4,0	83	7,4	84	7,5	212	18,9
discretion	41	3,6	76	6,7	85	7,5	202	17,8
respect	56	5,0	65	5,7	60	5,3	304	16
correctness	41	3,6	79	7,0	33	2,9	153	13,5
sense of humor	34	3,0	53	4,7	57	5,1	144	12,8
communicativity	27	2,4	47	4,2	41	3,6	115	10,2
willingness to work together	14	1,2	11	1,0	34	3,0	59	5,2
similarity	17	1,5	22	2,0	17	1,5	56	5
beauty	6	0,5	24	2,1	3	0,3	33	2,9
love	4	0,4	8	0,7	18	1,6	30	2,6
good listener	17	1,5	1	0,1	9	0,8	27	2,4
intelligence	7	0,6	2	0,2	17	1,5	26	2,3
common sense	3	0,3	8	0,7	10	0,9	21	1,9
dilligence	2	0,2	16	1,4	3	0,3	21	1,9
sociability	1	0,1	11	1,0	7	0,6	19	1,7
seriousness	3	0,3	9	0,8	3	0,3	15	1,4
faith	6	0,5	5	0,4	5	0,4	16	1,3
resourceful	4	0,4	8	0,7	2	0,2	14	1,3
the same principles	4	0,4	3	0,3	6	0,5	13	1,2
tolerance	1	0,1	3	0,3	8	0,7	12	1,1
responsible	3	0,3	7	0,6	2	0,2	12	1,1
prompt	2	0,2	2	0,2	6	0,5	10	0,9
wealth	6	0,5	1	0,1	2	0,2	9	0,8
courage	1	0,1	3	0,3	4	0,4	8	0,8
ambition	2	0,2	1	0,1	2	0,2	5	0,5
prestige	1	0,1	1	0,1	3	0,3	5	0,5
closed age	2	0,2	1	0,1	1	0,1	4	0,4
no specific qualities	2	0,2	64	5,8	4	0,4	70	6,3
not filled in	50	4,4	104	9,2	269	23,86	423	37,46
Total possible choices	1127	100	1127	100	1127	100	3381	300

The data in Table 1 lead to the following observations:

- 85.38% of students mentioned all three qualities of a friend, the difference up to 100 being represented by the students who haven't completed this item to varying degrees (at all, a quality, two qualities - 12.52%), and by those who don't wonder about the necessity of criteria in choosing friends 2.1%.
- The list of the qualities noticed by the students at their friends - understood as conditions for receiving the status of best friend - is long. We identified 30 characteristics in the students' responses, the frequency of their presence - regardless of their position - ranging between 1.1% and 55.2%.

- The data in Table 1 reveal differences (with some exceptions) in the hierarchy of the qualities that the students put in first place and the hierarchy made by us according to the frequency with which they occur, regardless of their place.
- The quality that appears in first place and with the highest frequency is honesty: from the percentage of 55.2% of the students who mentioned it as quality, 36.7% have placed it first. The importance of this quality is also showed by the difference of 18 percentage points ahead of the other qualities: confidence (37.2%), empathy (35.8%), kindness (18.9%), discretion (17.8%), respect (16%), correctness (13.5%), sense of humor (12.8%), communication skills (10.2%). The remaining 21 qualities occur in percentages smaller than 5%.

For the first nine qualities listed by the students, we propose different analyses by gender, area of residence and age, based on the data from Tables 2, 3 and 4.

Table of the place of the qualities that have a frequency higher than 10%, according to gender *Table 2*

Quality	Girls		Place	Boys		Place
	No.	%		No.	%	
honesty	354	62,32	1	265	47,74	1
trust	279	49,11	2	218	39,27	2
empathy	233	41,02	3	170	30,63	3
kindness	91	16,02	5	120	21,62	4
discretion	116	20,42	4	86	15,49	6
respect	83	14,61	6	98	17,65	5
correctness	71	12,5	9	82	14,77	7
sense of humor	72	12,67	8	70	12,61	8
communicativity	78	13,73	7	37	6,66	9

The observations that we can make based on the analysis of data depending on the students' gender are the following:

- Regardless of the students' gender, the first three positions are occupied by the qualities that have achieved the highest score in all the students' preferences. For the girls, there are some differences of 10 to 15 percentage points.
- Places 4-9 are occupied differently by gender. Compared to boys, for girls discretion is more important (4th place for girls, 6th place for boys) than kindness (4th place for boys, 5th place for girls). Qualities such as respect, correctness, sense of humor are more important for boys than communicativity, which received the lowest percentage, fewer than 10%. Girls are more prone to communicativity, which is more important than the sense of humor and correctness.

Table of the place of the qualities that have a frequency higher than 10%, according to area of residence *Table 3*

Quality	Urban		Place	Rural		Place
	No.	%		No.	%	
honesty	305	56,58	1	285	53,07	1
trust	232	43,04	2	243	45,25	2
empathy	179	33,20	3	203	37,80	3

kindness	100	18,55	4	105	19,55	5
discretion	74	13,72	7	122	22,71	4
respect	83	15,39	5	88	16,38	6
correctness	75	13,91	6	74	13,78	7
sense of humor	74	13,72	8	62	11,54	8
communicativity	57	10,57	9	54	10,05	9
Total number of students in areas...	539			537		

The analysis of the data in Table 3 allows us to make the following observations:

- No significant differences are observed in the places occupied by the qualities found in the first three positions, and the last two, out of the nine qualities analysed by us. The differences in percentage points are within the range (0.52% - 4.6%).
- The differences by area of residence are found at the qualities occupying positions 4-7. The highest difference in percentage points is observed in "discretion" - 9% for the students residing in rural areas. This is understandable given the affiliation to small communities where people know one another and interrelate stronger than in the city. Moreover, the percentage obtained by the qualities supporting discretion, such as trust, respect, and kindness has higher scores than for the urban students. For them, honesty is the most important value, including the urban-rural analysis.

Table of the percentage of the qualities that have a frequency higher than 10%, according to the age of the students Table 4

Age Quality	14	15	16	17	18	19	Total
honesty	50,9	60,69	50,55	53,63	59,6	60,86	336,23
trust	54,54	41,79	43,95	45,67	47,36	39,13	325,9
empathy	34,54	41,29	38,82	31,83	33,08	43,42	222,98
kindness	16,36	18,40	23,8	19,03	15,03	13,04	105,66
respect	21,81	12,93	16,48	16,26	15,41	21,73	104,62
discretion	18,18	15,42	15,01	14,53	23,20	0	86,34
corectitudinea	23,63	16,91	12,45	12,45	11,27	0	76,71
communicativity	21,81	12,43	7,69	9,68	11,27	0	62,88
sense of humor	5,45	14,92	13,18	15,57	10,15	0	59,27

The data in Table 4 allow the following observations based on the age of the students, starting from the three qualities of friendship mentioned by the respondents:

- The overall calculated percentage for honesty placed this quality in first place (336.23 percentage points). This quality is ranked first by the students aged 15-19, the highest percentage being recorded, with values approximately equal, at the students aged 19 (60.86%) and 15 (60.69%). The percentage average for the students aged 16, 17 and 18 is 53.69%, similar to the percentage obtained by this quality calculated for all students (55.2%), as shown in Table 4. The same trends are recorded for empathy, which is in third place as total percentage.
- If we analyze the percentages obtained by trust, which ranked second in the top of a friend's qualities, we observe some differences: among the surveyed students having six different ages, the highest percentage is found at students aged 14 (54, 54%), with almost 20 percentage points more than the value referred to the total number of students (37.2%). This quality has the highest percentage referred to the other values for the age of 14. The lowest percentage for this quality was registered at the students aged 19 (39.13%).
- The fourth place is occupied by different values, depending on age, the differentiation is evident at the extreme values of the six stages: correctness, at the age of 14 (23.63%), discretion, at the age of 18 (23.30% - the highest value recorded by this quality) and respect, at the age of 19 (13.04%). In the 15-17 age range, the fourth place is occupied by kindness, with percentages ranging between 18.40% and 23.8%.
- For the ability to communicate, the highest value is recorded at pupils aged 14 (21.81%). At this value, the percentages calculated for students aged 16 and 17, they are below 10% (the percentage for the sense of humor are below this limit, at the students aged 14).

If we synthesize the observations recorded at this item, we draw the following conclusions:

- ▶ The most popular qualities of a true friend are: honesty, trust, empathy, respect, kindness, discretion, correctness, sense of humor, communicability. With some exceptions, the hierarchy of the first nine attributes identified as having the most proposals from the students is the same regardless of gender, residence, and age.
- ▶ If we analyze these qualities in terms of how they contribute to the construction of the characteristics of friendship: reciprocity, constancy, self-sacrifice, sharing thoughts, feelings and emotions, communion, one confirms the fact that the foundations of true friendships are laid during high-school, and they will develop in time.
- ▶ For students, regardless of gender, residence, and age, the most important quality for engaging in a friendship with someone is honesty - more important for girls than for boys, in urban areas than rural ones, for the students aged 15 and 19 than for the other four age stages 14-19.
- ▶ Small percentages recorded by issues such as beauty (2.9%) and wealth (0.8%) show, on the one hand, the sincerity with which students filled in the questionnaire, and on the other, the complexity of their developing personality. At one point, students can make choices by pursuing issues that, from the perspective of adults, aren't within the characteristics of true friendship. From our point of view, more analyses are required related to the fact that 6.3% of students state that they do not choose their friends based on certain criteria.
- ▶ The large number of qualities that are found in the list which was made based on students' responses reveal the needs of young people, especially those linked with the main qualities: the need to live in truth, to feel safe, to be accepted as you are, to be respected, to live among good and generous people whose company creates soul tranquility etc.

2. Constancy of friendship in time

A second item asked the students to indicate the duration of friendship with their best friend. We aimed to identify the manner in which the durability of a friendship is found at high school students, with the passing of time. Specifically, we were interested to know whether there

is a relation of proportionality between the grade of the students and the duration of their friendships.

The data in Table 5 show a distribution by grade of the responses (in number and percentage) of the durability of the students' friendship with their best friend.

Table representing the number and the total percentage of the students with the grade distribution and the duration in years of the relationship with the best friend Table 5

Grade	Duration of friendship (in years)						No	Total
	1	2	3	4	5	> 5		
9th	67 22,7 1	167 56,6 1	32 10,8 4	18 6,1	4 1,3 5	4 1,35	3 10,1 6	295
10th	149 62,3 4	41 17,1 5	27 11,2 9	14 5,85	3 1,2 5	1 0,4	4 1,67	239
11th	55 18,1 5	198 65,3 4	32 10,5 6	6 1,98	4 1,3 2	2 0,66	6 1,98	303
12th	21 7,83	42 15,6 7	178 66,4 1	10 3,73	8 2,9 8	4 1,49	5 1,86	268
Total	292 25,9 0	448 39,7 5	269 23,8 6	48 4,25	19 1,6 8	11 0,97	18+ 22 3,54	1127
No	22							1127

The analysis of the data in Table 5 reveals the following:

- If we refer to the total number of students, the two-year period recorded the highest value of the respondents' answers: 39.75 % of the students gave this response; most students who gave this answer were 9th and 11th graders. Then follow the one-year friendship (25.90%) and the three-year friendship (23.86 %).
- Friendships with duration longer than 4 years can be found at a small proportion of all students, less than 5% with a decreasing tendency.
- The analysis of the results according to the students' grade show a repetitive distribution of the percentages for each grade: percentages over 50% for a period of time followed, at a difference in the range of 30-50 percentage points, by the following two values of the duration of friendship and by small percentages for a friendship longer than 4 years.
- Analyzing the data by gender, as shown in Table 6, it follows that we cannot talk about a greater constancy of the girls or the boys in a friendship, the differences between the percentages for each period of time being below 5%.

Table representing the number and the total percentage of the students and the distribution based on gender and duration in years of the friendship with the best friend Table 6

Grade	Duration of friendship (in years)	No	Total
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	1	2	3	4	5	> 5		
girls	145 25,5 2	220 38,7 3	147 25,8 8	31 5,45	11 1,9 3	6 1,05	8 1,40	568
boys	135 24,3 2	228 41,0 8	152 27,3 8	17 3,06	8 1,4 4	5 0,9	10 1,8	555
Total No	22							1127

- If the analysis takes into account the students' responses according to the area of residence (Table 7), we notice that there is some additional scoring only for the two years' friendships of the adolescents in the rural areas.

Table representing the number and the total percentage of the students and the distribution based on the area of residence and the duration in years of the friendship with the best friend Table 7

Grade	Duration of friendship (in years)						No	Total
	1	2	3	4	5	> 5		
urban	148 27,4 3	213 39,5 1	142 26,3 4	19 3,52	9 1,6 6	4 0,7	4 0,7	539
rural	98 18,2 4	235 43,7 6	156 29,0 5	29 5,40	10 1,8 6	7 1,3	2 0,3	537
Total No	51 + 6							1127

The conclusions that can be drawn from the observations made on the duration of the friendship with their best friend are:

- For the high school students, friendship is a value that is being rebuilt. A small percentage of students (6.9%) of all respondents stated periods of time over four years for the friendship with their best friend.
- The maximum value of percentages obtained for the two years' friendship reveals that the students are looking for new relationships, including matters relating to the maintenance of an option, to identify the best opportunities. We notice this aspect due to the 10 percentage points' difference in favor of the highest percentage - the 12th grade vs. the 9th grade.
- More than three quarters of the 9th graders maintain their friendships from the secondary school, but new friendships also appear for a year, without being able to mention if high school mates are included. A new dynamics of friendship follows along with the admission into a new cycle of education, which is more obvious at older students.
- The building and the stability of friendships beginning with the tenth grade is obvious due to the high percentages in the 1-3 years range, in an upward dynamics from the 10th grade to the 12th grade. This fact indicates, on the one hand, the transformation of a fellowship relation into one of friendship, the maintaining of the older friendships and the building of the new ones.
- The presence of some differences depending on the students' grade, in conjunction with the observation of the absence of any significant differences by gender and area of residence of the parents, show that students tend to maintain less friendships from the secondary school and to build new friendships in high school.

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Major changes in cognitive level of the high school adolescents are associated with important ones connected to emotionality, specifically to the reconstruction of friendships with new colleagues. The values that support these new emotional ties deserve great attention from the policy makers in education, so that future curriculum documents have the opportunity, not only to capitalize the desirable aspects which are relevant to teenagers, but also to support the formation and the development of the others. Even if in Romania, such practices have no tradition, the offered chance cannot be neglected.

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